REVISING A PAPER

Revision involves much more than proofreading: it's your opportunity to rethink a whole paper. In revising, professional writers often add and remove full sections of their drafts, change their order, or change their original arguments entirely. Fiction writers sometimes find themselves cutting out hundreds of pages and getting rid of a favorite character, changing an ending, or shifting the whole perspective from which a story is told.

Perhaps you began your paper thinking that you would focus on one topic, but ended up focusing on another? Perhaps you wrote down paragraphs about several good ideas as they occurred to you, but haven't yet worked out how those ideas are related to each other? The "revision" stage of your paper is your chance to address issues like these.

So read through your paper and have someone else read it too, if you can. **Look for the biggest changes you could make.** Don't worry about comma or citation rules until you're absolutely sure that the rest of your paper is as good as you can possibly make it. After all, why spend time "fixing" a sentence you'd be better off cutting?

■ Revising for Expectations

First impressions make a difference, and the first thing your teacher will see is your paper itself. So look at it. What do you see? If it's almost a page of unbroken black print, your paragraphs probably need to be divided. If it's a lot of three-line paragraphs, they're almost certainly too short for academic writing, so you'll want to develop or combine them. And if it's a long series of quotations, beware: as a general rule, direct quotations should make up no more than 10% of your paper. Plan on paraphrasing some of those quotations and adding more of your own discussion to them.

Now reread the assignment you were given. Pay particular attention to words **like describe, argue, persuade, and analyze**. If you're not sure what your assignment is asking for, ask your teacher or a Writing Center consultant. Once you're sure what you're being asked to do, look over your paper. Have you done it? Then list the main things the assignment asks for, and try to find each one in your paper. Is anything missing?

■ Revising for Thesis

Before you actually start revising, state your main point aloud. Now look at the paper. Where have you written it? Your reader will expect a clear statement of your thesis to appear in your conclusion and probably at the end of your introduction, as well. If it's not there, put it in! If a different point is there that might confuse the reader, move it or take it out. Then look at each paragraph. Do any seem to contradict your thesis? Do any seem unrelated to it? If so, you can

- cut the contradictory or unrelated paragraphs out, or
- add one or more sentences to each of them explaining exactly how they do help make your point, even though at first they don't look it, or
- change the thesis to reflect the argument you've actually made in your paper.

■ Revising for Organization

In the margin of your paper or on a separate sheet of paper, summarize each paragraph in 1-3 words. In a paper arguing against a core curriculum, for example, you might write:

Intro	
History	(When and where core curricula began)
Cost	(Credits are expensive for unwanted classes)
Learning/Caring	(Few of us learn well when we don't care)
Dropouts	(Some drop out of school due to trouble with subjects outside their majors)
Learning/Time	(Less time to focus on main interests)
Conclusion	

Now look at your list.

- Were you unable to summarize any paragraph? A paragraph with several different ideas can't be boiled down to 1-3 words. Decide which idea you want to focus on, add detail to it, and move the other ideas to other paragraphs.
- Does a long paragraph cover different topics at its beginning and end? Divide it.
- Does the same short description appear twice? Combine the two paragraphs into one, or revise each so it serves a separate purpose.
- Are related concepts separated? Switch paragraphs around until they're next to each other. (In the example above, the two about learning should be together.)
- How much of your paper is taken up by the introduction? A long introduction may suit a long paper, but if your introduction takes up half of a shorter paper, you'll need to work on cutting it and expanding the paragraphs that follow it. As a general rule, an introduction shouldn't take up more than 20% of a paper.

■ Revising for Development

Look at each paragraph in the body of your paper. What evidence or arguments does it include to back up its point? Is there a quotation, example, or statistic you could add to it? Have you followed each quotation, example, or statistic by explaining how it supports your argument? Don't try to make a paragraph longer by simply restating its point in other words.

■ Revising for Audience

Who is the audience for this paper? Is it a group of academic readers, like your teacher? Academic readers sometimes expect you to tell them things they may already know, just to establish that you know them. They may also expect you to use longer and more complex sentences, a more sophisticated vocabulary, and a more formal tone than other readers might. If your audience is nonacademic, ask yourself what those readers already know and believe about your topic. Is there any place where you're repeating what they're already likely to know or assuming that they know something they might not? Is there anywhere in your paper they might get lost? Will they be comfortable with the tone and language you've chosen?

Whoever your audience is, you'll want reading your paper to be easy and pleasant for them. So check to make sure you've included transitions to help your readers move smoothly from each sentence and paragraph to the next. Look, too at the structure of your sentences. Are any so long that they might become hard to follow? If so, divide them into shorter ones. Are several in a row short and similar? If so, combine some of them into longer ones. Try to include a mix of shorter and longer sentences in each paragraph.